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6 UNITED STATES DISTRICT COURT
7 WESTERN DISTRICT OF WASHINGTON
8 AT SEATTLE

9 ERNESTO VILLAFLO, R

10 Plaintiff,

11 v.

12 U.S. POSTAL SERVICE; MEGAN
13 BRENNAN, POSTMASTER GENERAL;
14 YUN HEE LEE; RON HARRELL, JULIO
RODRIGUEZ,

15 Defendants.

Case No. C16-1757RSM

ORDER GRANTING DEFENDANT’S
MOTION FOR SUMMARY JUDGMENT

16 **I. INTRODUCTION**

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18 This matter comes before the Court on Defendant Megan Brennan’s Motion for
19 Summary Judgment. Dkt. #30. Plaintiff Ernesto Villaflo opposes this Motion. Dkt. #35. For
20 the reasons stated below, the Court GRANTS Defendant’s Motion and DISMISSES this case.

21 **II. BACKGROUND**

22 Plaintiff Ernesto Villaflo is currently employed as a mail handler of the United States
23 Postal Service in Seattle, a position he has held for over 17 years. *See* Dkt. #31-1 (“Villaflo
24 Dep.”) at 9:24-10:10. Mr. Villaflo is male, over 60 years of age, and of Filipino and Puerto
25 Rican descent. *See* Dkt. #1 at ¶ 20. He has a shoulder injury necessitating modified duty status.
26 *See* Dkt. #8 at ¶ 44.
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1 On November 13, 2013, there was an incident between Mr. Villaflor and his supervisor,
2 Yun Hee Lee. *See* Villaflor Dep. at 67:16–69:8. Mr. Villaflor states that while he was talking
3 with a coworker, Ms. Lee came up and confronted him about interfering with a postal machine
4 using a postal sticker to cover up a sensor. *Id.* Mr. Villaflor testified in deposition that Ms. Lee
5 “slapped the sticker on my face,” and when Mr. Villaflor removed the sticker, “she snapped it
6 from my hand and did it a second time.” *Id.* Lee has denied that she deliberately touched his
7 face with the sticker, but does not deny that the interaction took place, that she raised her voice,
8 and that through the confrontation, the sticker stuck to his forehead. Dkt #33 (“Lee Decl.”), ¶2;
9 Dkt. #33-1 at 2.
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11 The same day as the incident, Mr. Villaflor reported it to Lee’s supervisor, Manager
12 Distribution Operation (“MDO”) Julio Rodriguez. Villaflor Dep. at 38:8–12 and 39:25–40:5.
13 According to Mr. Villaflor, Julio Rodriguez allegedly stated something to the effect of, “[d]on’t
14 tell me you haven’t been slapped by a woman before.” *Id.* at 83:4–6. Rodriguez called both
15 Plaintiff Villaflor and Lee into his office to learn from each of them what had happened. *Id.* at
16 39:2–41:7. Plaintiff Villaflor told Rodriguez that there had been witnesses to the incident, and
17 Rodriguez reviewed witness statements. *See id.* 41:8–42:18.
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19 Plaintiff Villaflor testified in deposition that after work he went to “Naval Hospital
20 emergency” because of continuing pain. *Id.* at 69:14–21. He was told to put ice on his face
21 because he had a bruise and was also given Tylenol. *Id.* at 69:22–25. Mr. Villaflor took three
22 or four days of leave. *Id.* at 24:19–23. Also of note, the record shows that from October 2014
23 through June 2015 Mr. Villaflor went to a social worker with a background in psychological
24 counselling to deal with work-related stress. *See id.* at 55:22–57:2.
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1 Mr. Rodriguez instructed both Plaintiff Villaflor and Lee to have no further contact with
2 each other. *See* Lee Decl. at ¶ 6; Villaflor Dep. at 176:18–25. Rodriguez removed Mr. Villaflor
3 from Lee’s supervision. *See* Lee Decl., ¶ 1; Villaflor Dep. at 43:10–17. According to Mr.
4 Villaflor, he was still occasionally required to send schedule changes to Lee. *Id.* at 44:15–18.

5 Mr. Villaflor later spoke with the Postal Service’s Human Resources Department. *See*
6 *id.* at 84:12–85:9. Human Resources contacted the Postal Inspectors, and within two days of the
7 incident, Postal Inspector Michelle Brooks interviewed Mr. Villaflor. *See id.* at 85:19–25.
8 Inspector Brooks conducted an investigation based on the allegations. *Id.* at 88:14–19.

9 One month later, Plaintiff Villaflor initiated the EEO process on December 16, 2013.
10 Dkt. #31-2.

11 On January 2, 2014, a coworker named Sylvia Woods provided a statement to Inspector
12 Brooks. This statement indicated that Ms. Lee, speaking with Ms. Woods, stated that Mr.
13 Villaflor “is no good and all the supervisors are watching him.” Dkt. #36-3 at 2.

14 Postal Inspector Brooks issued an Investigative Memorandum dated February 24, 2014,
15 in which she recommended that: “Postal Management should follow up with all parties and
16 witnesses to determine if action is necessary.” Dkt. #33-2 at 6.

17 On March 14, 2014, Rodriguez talked to Lee a second time about the incident and
18 conducted an investigative interview of Lee. Dkt. #33-3. One week later, on March 21, 2014,
19 MDO Rodriguez then issued Lee a Letter of Warning and also instructed Lee to undergo anger
20 management training. Dkt. #33-4. In her Letter of Warning, Lee was told that: “This letter is
21 also to inform you that you must refrain from the type of behavior listed in the charge above.
22 Failure to correct these deficiencies may result in further disciplinary action, including
23 downgrade or your removal from the Postal Service.” *Id.*

1 Lee never tried to speak with Plaintiff Villaflor after Rodriguez's November 2013 no-
2 contact instruction. *See* Villaflor Dep., 175:15–177:5. Plaintiff has had no further contact with
3 Lee since the November 13, 2013, incident. *Id.* at 42:19–43:12.

4 Plaintiff Villaflor testified that on March 27, 2014, Supervisor Ronald Harrell, without
5 explanation, instructed him to work only at Stations 1 and 6 within his work area. *Id.* at 96:22–
6 99:22. When asked if this was done “in retaliation for you complaining about Ms. Lee,” Mr.
7 Villaflor said “[y]es” and that “I don’t have no evidence, but that’s what I believe.” *Id.* at
8 99:23–100:4. The only difference in working at Stations 1 and 6 versus other stations was “they
9 just wanted me to work at one and six while everybody else can work anywhere they want;” Mr.
10 Villaflor has admitted there was no financial or economic impact to this change and that the
11 change only lasted two weeks. *Id.* at 100:13–101:12. After two weeks, Mr. Villaflor simply
12 stopped complying with this restriction without telling anyone, and was not disciplined. *Id.* at
13 101:13–102:18.

14 On May 16, 2014, Mr. Villaflor’s Union issued a Grievance relating to Mr. Villaflor’s
15 treatment. Dkt. #36-5. The Union specifically contended that Ms. Lee’s actions “embarrassed,
16 humiliated and demoralized” Mr. Villaflor. *Id.* Further, the Union argued that the Post Office
17 did not afford the complaint due diligence and that the prolonged period of time during which
18 nothing was done “mocks past policies.” *Id.* The Union suggested that Ms. Lee be ordered to
19 have no contact or supervision over Mr. Villaflor, via written removal notice, until after
20 documented anger management training. *Id.*

21 Plaintiff Villaflor does not identify any other instances of alleged retaliation.

22 On November 14, 2016, Plaintiff filed this case. Plaintiff alleges in his Complaint that
23 he was the victim of discrimination when Ms. Lee slapped the postage sticker twice on his face
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1 and called him stupid in front of co-workers on November 13, 2013. *See* Dkt. #1 at ¶¶ 4, 27-
2 28, 46, 50, 53, 56, 59. Plaintiff alleges that he was retaliated against by his supervisors Ron
3 Harrell and Julio Rodriguez when, on March 27, 2014, they ordered him to work at only two
4 stations, when prior to filing an EEO complaint against Lee he had moved freely among
5 various work stations within his work area. *See id.* at ¶¶ 5-6, 36-38, 47, 50, 53, 56, 59, 62.
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7 Plaintiff brought claims for disability discrimination and retaliation pursuant to the
8 Americans with Disability Act (“ADA”), 42 U.S.C. § 12112. *See id.* at ¶¶ 42-47, 60-62. On
9 July 7, 2017, this Court granted Defendants’ motion to dismiss these claims. Dkt. #29.
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11 Plaintiff’s remaining claims are for race, color, and gender discrimination and
12 retaliation pursuant to the Civil Rights Act of 1964, as amended, 42 U.S.C. § 2000e-1, et seq.
13 (“Title VII”). *Id.* at ¶¶ 48-56, 60-62. Plaintiff also brings an age discrimination claim and
14 retaliation claim pursuant to the Age Discrimination in Employment Act of 1967, as amended,
15 29 U.S.C. § 633a (“ADEA”). *Id.* at ¶¶ 57-62.
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17 **III. DISCUSSION**

18 **A. Legal Standard**

19 Summary judgment is appropriate where “the movant shows that there is no genuine
20 dispute as to any material fact and the movant is entitled to judgment as a matter of law.” Fed.
21 R. Civ. P. 56(a); *Anderson v. Liberty Lobby, Inc.*, 477 U.S. 242, 247 (1986). Material facts are
22 those which might affect the outcome of the suit under governing law. *Anderson*, 477 U.S. at
23 248. In ruling on summary judgment, a court does not weigh evidence to determine the truth of
24 the matter, but “only determine[s] whether there is a genuine issue for trial.” *Crane v. Conoco,*
25 *Inc.*, 41 F.3d 547, 549 (9th Cir. 1994) (citing *Federal Deposit Ins. Corp. v. O’Melveny &*
26 *Meyers*, 969 F.2d 744, 747 (9th Cir. 1992)).
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1 On a motion for summary judgment, the court views the evidence and draws inferences
2 in the light most favorable to the non-moving party. *Anderson*, 477 U.S. at 255; *Sullivan v.*
3 *U.S. Dep't of the Navy*, 365 F.3d 827, 832 (9th Cir. 2004). The Court must draw all reasonable
4 inferences in favor of the non-moving party. *See O'Melveny & Meyers*, 969 F.2d at 747, *rev'd*
5 *on other grounds*, 512 U.S. 79 (1994). However, the nonmoving party must make a "sufficient
6 showing on an essential element of her case with respect to which she has the burden of proof"
7 to survive summary judgment. *Celotex Corp. v. Catrett*, 477 U.S. 317, 323 (1986).

9 **B. Discrimination Claims**

10 Title VII prohibits discrimination against an employee or an applicant for employment
11 on the basis of race, color, religion, sex, or national origin. 42 U.S.C. § 2000e-2(a). The ADEA
12 applies to age related claims. To prevail on a Title VII or ADEA discrimination claim for
13 disparate treatment, a plaintiff must establish a *prima facie* case by presenting evidence that
14 "gives rise to an inference of unlawful discrimination." *Cordova v. State Farm Ins. Co.*, 124
15 F.3d 1145, 1148 (9th Cir. 1997); *see also McDonnell Douglas Corp. v. Green*, 411 U.S. 792,
16 802 (1973). A plaintiff can establish a *prima facie* case through direct evidence or through
17 circumstantial evidence via the burden shifting framework set forth in *McDonnell Douglas*.
18 *Metayer v Chassman*, 504 F.3d 919, 931 (9th Cir. 2007).

21 Under *McDonnell Douglas*, the plaintiff carries the initial burden of establishing a *prima*
22 *facie* case. *McDonnell Douglas*, 411 U.S. at 802. To do so, the plaintiff must show that (1) she
23 belongs to a protected class; (2) she performed her job satisfactorily; (3) she experienced an
24 adverse employment action; and (4) similarly situated individuals outside her protected class
25 were treated more favorably, or other circumstances surrounding the adverse employment
26 action give rise to an inference of discrimination. *Hawn v. Executive Mgmt., Inc.*, 615 F.3d
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1 1151, 1156 (9th Cir. 2010). If plaintiff is able to meet this test, the burden shifts to the
2 employer to articulate a legitimate, nondiscriminatory reason for its action.

3 Under Title VII, in order to establish a hostile work environment claim, the plaintiff
4 must show: 1) he was subjected to verbal or physical conduct because of his race, color, or
5 gender; 2) the conduct was unwelcome; and 3) the conduct was sufficiently severe or pervasive
6 to alter the conditions of the plaintiff's employment and create an abusive work environment.
7 *See, e.g., Ellison v. Brady*, 924 F.2d 872, 875-76 (9th Cir. 1991); *Hosea v. Donley*, 584 Fed.
8 App'x 608, 611 (9th Cir. 2014) (citation omitted); *see also Harris v. Forklift Systems, Inc.*, 510
9 U.S. 17, 20 (1993); *Vasquez v. County of Los Angeles*, 349 F.3d 634, 642 (9th Cir. 2004). The
10 courts apply the same analysis under the ADEA. *See, e.g., Bishop v. Donahoe*, 479 Fed. App'x
11 55, 56 (9th Cir. 2012); *Robinson v. Pierce County*, 539 F.Supp.2d 1316, 1329-30 (W.D. Wash.
12 2008).

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15 The Court has examined the record in the light most favorable to Plaintiff, but has
16 nevertheless identified several critical problems with Mr. Villaflor's discrimination claims.

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18 First, the Court agrees with Defendant that Mr. Villaflor cannot establish a hostile work
19 environment claim. This case concerns a single incident of head or face slapping followed by
20 separation of the individuals involved. Subsequent events include Mr. Villaflor having to avoid
21 Ms. Lee and the statement attributed to Ms. Lee that Mr. Villaflor was "no good" and being
22 watched by supervisors. Mr. Villaflor struggles to point to conduct that relates to his race,
23 gender, or age; the closest he comes is when Julio Rodriguez stated something to the effect of,
24 "[d]on't tell me you haven't been slapped by a woman before." Villaflor Dep. at 83:4-6. The
25 Court concludes that none of this, separately or together, constitutes sufficiently severe or
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1 pervasive conduct so as to alter the conditions of Plaintiff's employment and create an abusive
2 work environment.

3 Second, the Court finds that Mr. Villaflor cannot otherwise show discrimination because
4 he cannot show he experienced an adverse employment action. Mr. Villaflor was not
5 transferred out of his position, demoted, suspended, or terminated. His working stations were
6 limited for a short period of time (see Retaliation section below). Mr. Villaflor's unilateral
7 decision to stop following that limitation was not resisted by his supervisor. Mr. Villaflor
8 argues that "[t]he assault in public was, in itself, adverse employment action that embarrassed
9 and humiliated Mr. Villaflor in front of his co-workers..." Dkt. #35 at 10. The assault may
10 have been an adverse *action* occurring during Mr. Villaflor's employment, but it was not an
11 "employment action" as contemplated by this area of the law. Mr. Villaflor also argues that
12 being ordered to avoid contact with Ms. Lee was adverse employment action. *Id.* The Court
13 disagrees; this was a reasonable response from an employer designed to protect Mr. Villaflor
14 from potential harassment, and there is no evidence that it *materially* changed the terms and
15 conditions of his employment. *See Burlington N. & Santa Fe Ry. Co.*, 548 U.S. at 53.
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19 Third, even if there had been an adverse employment action, there is no direct evidence
20 of discrimination, and the circumstantial evidence does not give rise to an inference of
21 discrimination. Defendant is correct in noting:

22 The only purported evidence of bias offered by Plaintiff Villaflor
23 does not even relate to Lee's conduct at all. Plaintiff Villaflor
24 complains that at some point after the incident with Lee was
25 reported and was being investigated, MDO Rodriguez allegedly
26 downplayed the significance of the incident between Plaintiff and
27 Lee with an alleged comment about being slapped by a woman.
28 *See Plaintiff's Response*, Dkt. No. 35, p. 10; *see also Defendant's*
Motion, Dkt. No. 30, p. 3. This alleged comment by Rodriguez has
no probative value as to whether Lee's conduct towards Plaintiff
Villaflor was based upon any type of discriminatory animus.

1 Dkt. #38 at 3.

2 Given the above, Plaintiff cannot bring a claim of discrimination under Title VII or the
3 ADEA.
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5 **C. Retaliation Claim**

6 Plaintiff can establish a prima facie case of retaliation under Title VII and the ADEA by
7 showing that: 1) he engaged in a protected activity; 2) he suffered an adverse employment
8 action; and 3) there was a causal link between the protected activity and the adverse
9 employment action. *Ray v. Henderson*, 217 F.3d 1234 (9th Cir. 2000); *Bishop*, 479 Fed. App'x
10 at 56. "The antiretaliation provision protects an individual not from all retaliation, but from
11 retaliation that produces an injury or harm." *Burlington Northern & Santa Fe Railway Co.*, 548
12 U.S. at 67. A "plaintiff must show that a reasonable employee would have found the challenged
13 action materially adverse, which in this context means it well might have dissuaded a
14 reasonable worker from making or supporting a charge of discrimination." *Id.* (citations
15 omitted); *Ray*, 217 F.3d at 1242-43.
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17 Defendant argues Mr. Villaflor cannot establish the second element above because the
18 two-week restriction on where he worked within his work area did not constitute an adverse
19 employment action. Dkt. #30 at 11. Mr. Villaflor "must show that a reasonable employee
20 would have found the challenged action materially adverse, 'which in this context means it well
21 might have 'dissuaded a reasonable worker from making or supporting a charge of
22 discrimination.'"" *Id.* (citing *Burlington Northern & Santa Fe Railway Co.*, 548 U.S. at 67;
23 *Ray*, 217 F.3d at 1242-43). Defendants point out that Mr. Villaflor has admitted to not suffering
24 any economic consequences, and that after a couple of weeks, he "simply stopped complying
25 with the Postal Service's instruction, and he was never disciplined or cautioned." *Id.* at 12.
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1 Defendant argues that “if Plaintiff Villaflor was confident enough that he felt he could disobey
2 his employer’s instructions and resume working at his prior work stations, then, as a matter of
3 law, his employer’s decision to restrict his work areas was not the kind of action that would
4 have dissuaded a reasonable worker from making or supporting a charge of discrimination.” *Id.*

5 In Response, Mr. Villaflor argues that limiting him to working Stations 1 and 6 “was in
6 fact an adverse employment action” because it “ostracized Mr. Villaflor from his co-workers,
7 deprived him of freedom of movement and interaction in an obvious manner, and was so
8 stressful to him that it forced him to seek medical treatment and miss work.” Dkt. #35 at 16.

9 The Court finds that Mr. Villaflor has failed to establish the second element of his *prima*
10 *facie* case of retaliation as a matter of law. Mr. Villaflor has failed to make a “sufficient
11 showing,” *see Celotex, supra*, that being limited to working Stations 1 and 6 materially changed
12 the terms and conditions of his employment. Taking the undisputed facts in the light most
13 favorable to Mr. Villaflor, this employment action simply is not adverse in the sense that it
14 would have dissuaded a reasonable employee from making or supporting a charge of
15 discrimination. Defendant is correct to point out the lack of impact this directive had on Mr.
16 Villaflor, who simply stopped following the directive after two weeks. Without an adverse
17 employment action, Mr. Villaflor’s retaliation claim fails.

21 IV. CONCLUSION

22 Having reviewed the relevant pleadings, the declarations and exhibits attached thereto,
23 and the remainder of the record, the Court hereby finds and ORDERS:
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- 25 1) Defendant’s Motion for Summary Judgment (Dkt. #30) is GRANTED. Defendant’s
26 remaining claims are DISMISSED.
27 2) This case is CLOSED.
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2 DATED this 21 day of May, 2018.

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5 RICARDO S. MARTINEZ
6 CHIEF UNITED STATES DISTRICT JUDGE
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